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## Spirituality vital for character development in children

### ***Educators need clear guidelines to grow students' spiritual formation***

**Researchers at Notre Dame University are rewriting the playbook for early childhood educators in a bid to provide greater spiritual opportunities for children in Australia's Catholic classrooms and child care centres.**

A study by Christine Robinson, PhD candidate and Senior Lecturer in Notre Dame's School of Education, indicates that an increase in play-based learning in the early childhood setting – at the expense of a heavy academic curriculum – gives young students invaluable spiritual development opportunities.

Findings also suggest educators need greater spiritual formation. They were found to lack awareness of the spiritual moments that occur in their own lives, preventing them from effectively communicating with students.

Often mistaken as a solely religious concept, spirituality broadly refers to a range of human emotions, including a sense of connection experienced through wonder, awe, belonging and wellbeing, which are integral to a child's emotional development.

"Spirituality is intrinsically connected to the development of self-awareness and identity in early childhood, especially in the areas of communication, relationships and broader understanding of the world." Ms Robinson said.

"Educators need to play a vital role in children's spirituality by providing opportunities for this capacity to be experienced and expressed. A more robust investment in this capacity during childhood can be beneficial later in life, for example in terms of resilience and self-development."

Ms Robinson's three-year investigation provides insights into the educators' understanding of spirituality, their knowledge of children's spirituality and the practices they employ, both the planned and unplanned, to promote children's spirituality.

Despite the national policy, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, which requires educators to attend to children's spiritual development, Ms Robinson found that there were no clear guidelines or strategies for educators to follow.

She said educators possessed a limited understanding about the broader concept of spirituality and, as a result, they were restricted in their ability to proactively develop activities to promote spirituality in a Catholic classroom or child care centre.

"Educators are promoting children's spirituality, but in an unintentional and unplanned way, and most are unable to recognise a child's moment of spirituality taking place before their eyes," Ms Robinson said.

"As educators often view the concept of spirituality solely within a religious context, they tend to avoid the integration of these experiences in the classroom as not all students come from a faith background.



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# Media Release



“Spiritual moments are often child-initiated and spontaneous – educators must possess the skills to discern incidental moments within each child’s day that are open to spiritual possibilities. Everyone has the potential to be spiritual.”

## Ends

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**Caption:** Christine Robinson is examining the growing importance of spirituality in early childhood learning as part of her PhD at Notre Dame.



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